

# Unconventional Warfare: The Political Destabilization Campaign continues in Venezuela

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*Since February, continuing protests, many of them violent, against the socialist government of President Nicolás Maduro have claimed more than 40 lives in Venezuela and injured more than 800 people. Most were victims of opposition supporters who have also set fire to universities, public buildings and bus stations – even the buses themselves have been burned. The scale of the protests has decreased since the start of April when the government and opposition leaders held talks to end the conflict. Much of the unrest had until then taken place in richer neighbourhoods, led by students attending private schools. But recently demonstrations have been restricted to opposition strongholds, such as Táchira state on the Colombian border. The protestors cite high inflation, and shortages of food and other goods as the source of their frustration. The latter is almost certainly the result of hoarding by opposition-owned and controlled distribution chains.*

The demonstrations have been carried out by right wing political parties opposed to the Maduro government's progressive program. Backing these parties, and several of the NGOs organizing protests, is the United States, which has been trying to overthrow the Venezuelan government since 2002 – the year former President Hugo Chavez, now deceased, was briefly removed in a CIA-orchestrated military coup. Since 1998, Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution has significantly redistributed wealth from the rich to the poor majority in Venezuela, bringing them free medical care and education, as well as subsidized food and housing, land reform and grassroots participatory democracy in the form of communal councils.

On the continental level, Chavez was the most prominent leader of the Latin American Revolution, or Pink Tide, which integrated and united left-leaning countries economically and politically, and substantially weakened U.S. influence in the region. For example, the former Venezuelan leader helped create several new Pan-American political, economic and development agencies, including the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), Bank of the South (Banco del sur), Telesur (Television network of the South) and PetroSur, a co-operative energy venture between several Latin American states. The idea behind all of these is to develop an entirely new socialist-oriented continental economy, one that does not function according to capitalist market rules but rather responds to the development needs of the Latin American people.

Such revolutionary domestic and regional policies have incurred the wrath of Washington and the Venezuelan elite, which has lost 18 out of 19 elections since the very popular Chavez first took office. The Venezuelan electoral process under Chavez and Maduro has

been called “the best in the world” by ex-U.S. President Jimmy Carter after observing the 2013 presidential elections. Chavez’s death that year transferred his popularity to Maduro, his chosen successor, who continues to win elections, compelling the opposition to resort once again to widespread violence to try to overthrow the government. At stake for the U.S. is control of Venezuela’s enormous mineral wealth. The country is estimated to have the world’s largest oil reserves.

President Maduro calls the protests “the revolt of the rich.” Asked by a Guardian U.K. reporter in April whether his government should accept responsibility for some of the killings, he proposed that 95 per cent of protest-related deaths were the fault of “right wing extremist groups” at the barricades. Maduro mentioned three motorcyclists who were beheaded by a wire strung across the road by protesters. In the same exclusive Guardian interview, Maduro, a former bus driver and unionist, emphasized the considerable increases in social services and reduction in inequality over the last 15 years.

“When I was a union leader there wasn’t a single programme to protect the education, health, housing and salaries of the workers,” he said. “It was the reign of savage capitalism. Today in Venezuela, the working class is in power: it’s the country where the rich protest and the poor celebrate their social well-being.”

Now Venezuela is facing an “unconventional war that the U.S. has perfected over the last decades” in a string of coups spanning from Brazil in the 1960s to Honduras very recently, continued Maduro. He told the Guardian that Venezuela’s opposition aims at “paralyzing the main cities of the country, copying badly what happened in Kiev, where the main roads in the cities were blocked off, until they made governability impossible, which led to the overthrow of the elected government of Ukraine.

“They try to increase economic problems through an economic war to cut the supplies of basic goods and boost an artificial inflation...to create social discontent and violence, to portray a country in flames, which could lead them to justify international isolation and even foreign intervention,”

he said.

Such tactics mirror those used by the CIA in Chile in 1973 to overthrow the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. At the time, U.S. President Richard Nixon specifically instructed the CIA to make the Chilean economy “scream.” When this was not enough to unseat Allende, the Chilean military stepped in to finish the job. This option is not open to the U.S. in Venezuela where the military showed its loyalty in 2002 by returning Chavez to power. Washington is reduced to funding an ineffectual and violent political opposition that can neither win elections nor sustain large-scale demonstrations.

On April 23, Eva Golinger, an award-winning Venezuelan journalist and author of *The Chavez Code*, wrote on her *Postcards from the Revolution* blog:

Anti-government protests in Venezuela that seek regime change have been led by several individuals and organizations with close ties to the U.S. government. Leopoldo Lopez and Maria Corina Machado, two of the public leaders behind the violent protests, have long histories as collaborators, grantees and agents of Washington. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S.

Agency for International Development (USAID) have channelled multi-million dollar funding to Lopez's political parties Primero Justicia and Voluntad Popular, and Machado's non-government organization (NGO) Sumate and her electoral campaigns.

Golinger described the NED as a foundation created by the U.S. Congress in 1983 "to essentially do the CIA's work overtly." The NED has been "one of the principal financiers of destabilization in Venezuela" throughout the Chavez and Maduro administrations, she said.

The NED and USAID have given more than \$14 million to opposition groups in Venezuela in the past year, including funding for political campaigns in 2013 and the current protests. Since 2001, the U.S. government has given anti-Chavez and anti-Maduro groups more than \$100 million to undermine and overthrow both progressive governments, including financing the 2002 coup, added Golinger. All this despite the fact the Venezuelan National Assembly passed the Law of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination in 2010, which is supposed to ban foreign funding of political groups in the country.

Golinger explained that the NED directly violated this law by funding the opposition coalition Democratic Unity Table (MUD) through the U.S. International Republican Institute (IRI), with \$100,000 going to share lessons learned with anti-government groups in Nicaragua, Argentina and Bolivia, and "allow for the adaption of the Venezuelan experience in these countries." (The reference to the IRI project has been removed from the NED website but is still accessible as a cached page.)

Between 2013 and 2014, NED funds were also given to media groups that "run the campaign to discredit the government of President Maduro," wrote Golinger. "Throughout the past year, an unprecedented media war has been waged against the Venezuelan government and President Maduro directly, which has intensified during the past few months of protests."

This media war has been fanned by the Western mainstream press, which has re-broadcast images from Twitter that were actually from Egypt and Syria while claiming these came from Venezuela. The mainstream media has also shown Venezuelan state security forces that were disbanded two years ago. But unbiased accounts can be found. On April 8, reporting from Caracas, Guardian U.K. editor and columnist Seumas Milne wrote:

What are portrayed as peaceful protests have all the hallmarks of an anti-democratic rebellion, shot through with class privilege and racism. Overwhelmingly middle class and confined to wealthy white areas, the protests have now shrunk to firebombings and ritual fights with the police, while parts of the opposition have agreed to peace talks.

Milne said it is "hardly surprising" that President Maduro compares the situation in his country to Ukraine, where there is also evidence of U.S.- backed destabilization (see my article in the April 2014 Monitor).

"The U.S. claim that this is an unfounded 'excuse' is absurd," he wrote. "Evidence for the U.S. subversion of Venezuela—from the 2002 coup through WikiLeaks-revealed cables outlining U.S. plans to 'penetrate', 'isolate' and 'divide' the Venezuelan government, to continuing large-scale funding of opposition groups—is voluminous."

“We are witnessing in Venezuela the attempt by the undemocratic opposition to get by force what they could not attain through the ballot box: their hands on the government and control of the petroleum revenues,” said Venezuelan-Canadian sociologist Dr. María Páez Victor in an interview.

“The revolution is not in the street protest, it is with the revolutionary Bolivarian Government that still has the solid support of its people and its loyal armed forces. It is here to stay – it is the oligarchs and the United States and Canada that have turned their backs on democracy and history.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Canadian government has enthusiastically joined the U.S. in being hostile to Maduro, blaming him for the protests and, in March, suspending Air Canada’s flights to Venezuela. Machado, one of the two main opposition leaders in Venezuela, who has refused to negotiate with President Maduro and has incited violence in Venezuela during the protests, visited Canada in May. As reported by The Media Co-Op, she spoke to about 60 “staunch opposition supporters” at an event in Toronto organized by the Canadian Council for the Americas, which took place at the offices of law firm Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP. Machado was also granted a private meeting in Ottawa with John Baird, Canada’s minister of foreign affairs.

“It is utterly shocking that this terrorist ... is being received by the foreign minister of Canada,” commented Dr. Páez Victor.

*Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor’s international affairs correspondent.*

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